

Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

Mobster's Summons by Probers

Perhaps the most feared mobster in the underworld is Florida's Mafia chieftain, Santos Trafficante. House investigators approached his Miami hideaway, therefore, with some apprehension.

He appeared at the screendoor to accept their subpoena. "Shove it under the door," he said softly. They peered through the screen. The sinister Trafficante was pale, and his hands were shaking.

He may have had reason to shake. The House Assassinations Committee had taken a sudden interest in the murder last July of mobster John Rosselli. Before he died, the flamboyant Rosselli hinted that he knew who had arranged President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Carefully hedging, he told an incredible story that implicated Trafficante.

The New York Times reported on the front page that Rosselli was murdered as a "direct result" of his Senate testimony about the Kennedy assassination.

Twelve days before his death, Rosselli dined with Trafficante at the fashionable Landings Restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. It is the custom of the Mafia to wine and dine a wayward member before he is executed.

The unfortunate Rosselli had been the victim of a gangland execution. This raised some nagging questions in the minds of the committee's homicide experts who are wise in the ways of the mob.

Why would the Mafia knock off a retired racketeer? The fact that he had appeared before the Senate normally would have deterred the crime lords.

They would rather not risk antagonizing the federal government by murdering a celebrated witness unless there was some compelling reasons.

The experts doubted the Mafia was upset over Rosselli's confession that, as a hit man for the Central Intelligence Agency, he had attempted to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. The mobsters hated Castro, who had expropriated their casinos in Havana. So they should not have minded his CIA mission.

We furnished the committee with a more likely motive for the murder. We got the story from Rosselli himself, bit by bit, over the past six years. He had come to trust us during our investigation of the CIA plot to kill Castro. Whenever Rosselli was in Washington, he dropped by. His associates, knowing of his trust in us, called us ahead of the authorities about his disappearance.

The CIA had figured that the Havana underworld must have killers who could eliminate Castro. The CIA, therefore, spoke secretly to Howard Hughes' chief hunchman in Las Vegas, Robert Maheu, about the project. Maheu recruited Rosselli, then the Chicago mob's debonair representative in Las Vegas.

Rosselli looked upon the assassination mission as an opportunity to gain favor with the U.S. government. But he lacked the stature to deal with Santos Trafficante, who controlled the Havana underworld. Rosselli enlisted his own superior, Chicago godfather Sam Giancana, to approach Trafficante.

Giancana flew down to Miami to make the arrangements with the Florida racket boss. Then with Trafficante's blessing, Rosselli used the Havana underworld to plot Castro's demise.

The assassination squad tried to plant poison pills, supplied by the CIA, in Castro's food. Castro became ill but failed to die. Then underworld snipers were dispatched to a Havana rooftop. Unhappily for them, they were caught.

Rosselli told us the rest of the story as his own "speculation." But it was his habit to pass us tips in the form of conjecture. There is a good chance he was not merely speculating but had picked up information inside the mob. At least, here's his startling story:

Rosselli heard that Castro had tortured the would-be assassins and had learned about the plot on his life. It would be the sort of irony that Latin-Americans appreciate, Rosselli suggested, for Castro to use the same plotters to retaliate against the U.S. President.

According to Rosselli's speculation, Castro may have used these underworld elements, most of them Cubans from the old Trafficante organization, to arrange the assassination of Kennedy.

They may have lined up Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin or may have used him as a decoy while others ambushed Kennedy from closer range. Once Oswald was captured, the mob couldn't afford to let him reveal his connection with the underworld. So Rosselli speculated that Jack Ruby, a small-time hoodlum with ties to the Havana underworld, was ordered to eliminate Oswald.

This sort of "speculation" might have induced the mob to silence John Rosselli.